

Public education, socio-environmental crises and challenges in the culture wars

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Summary:

The article argues that the serious socio-environmental crisis expresses a metabolic rupture between nature and society arising from the contradictions of capitalism. It discusses educational challenges in a context in which the far-right has inserted climate and environmental issues into the culture wars. It highlights denialism in Brazil as an agenda of the Bolsonaro government (2019-2022) and of the far-right, directed at education, culture, science and socio-environmental problems. It outlines lines of action so that the educational field can contribute to the reversal of environmental crises and catastrophes through a collective struggle for the preservation of life on the planet.

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Basic and post-secondary public education are being challenged on an unprecedented scale by the successive socio-environmental catastrophes that highlight a serious metabolic rupture between humanity and nature (Foster, 2020; Saito, 2021). The contradictions of the accumulation of capital are generating ecological crises and catastrophes that affect the entire planet and especially the Earth's critical zone, the area identified as the one with the greatest impact on global climate change¹.

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Powerful ideological and economic obstacles impede efforts to prevent the acceleration of catastrophes. Climate deniers attack researchers and their institutions, claiming conspiracy theories and accusing them of acting in a politicized way to the detriment of the “real” scientific evidence that, against all scientific studies, exempts human factors from any responsibility for climate change². The main target of the deniers is the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), created to consolidate the results of scientific studies published in the most important international journals, interpret them and issue assessments on the climate health of the Earth.

In Brazil, former President Jair Bolsonaro (2019-2022) was an exponent of scientific denialism in the service of predatory economic interests. He encouraged mining companies, cattle ranchers and soy producers to deforest the Amazon region, including indigenous territories, resulting in a true policy of genocide – deaths from malnutrition, Covid-19 and executions of indigenous leaders and defenders by professional killers. Peoples like the Yanomamis are under severe threats that endanger their survival. To camouflage the denunciations made by human rights defenders, Bolsonaro undertook a fierce crusade against universities and public scientific research institutes and he discredited environmental protection agencies and indigenous peoples defense agencies (Leher, 2021). Under his government, research as well as teaching and learning on environmental issues came to constitute the core theater of operations of the culture wars (Alexander, 2018).

1. Berwyn, B. (2023, January 18). One of the world’s coldest places is now the warmest it’s been in 1,000 years, scientists say. Inside Climate News. Retrieved from https://insideclimatenews.org/news/18012023/greenland-ice-sheet-global-warming/?utm_source=InsideClimate%2BNews&utm_campaign=b8dbae5dd0-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2023_01_21_05_00&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_29c928ffb5-b8dbae5dd0-330155310

2. MOLION, L. C. (2019, March 9). Por uma agenda climática baseada em evidências e nos interesses reais da sociedade. Carta aberta ao ministro do Meio Ambiente, Ricardo de Aquino Salles. Notícias Agrícolas. Retrieved from <https://www.no->

Socio-environmental problems and culture war: education under pressure

To face the socio-environmental crisis that threatens life on Earth, profound changes in educational systems will be necessary. These changes are a nightmare for the far-right, for predatory economic sectors, for financial operators and for austerity advocates. Interest groups, extremist factions, religious groups and far-right think tanks have captured the political potential of socio-environmental issues and inserted the issue into the theater of operations of the culture wars. To dispel their nightmares, they spread mistrust in science, public education, teachers and scientists, as well as in socio-environmental movements.

The production of this mistrust is part of the strategy of powerful private hegemonic apparatuses that have been waging a cultural war against the liberating and emancipatory values of the Enlightenment. Think tanks, like the Heritage Foundation and Heartland Institute, have built international networks among corporate interests, conservative-leaning media outlets and pseudoscientists to convey to the public the false idea that there are “two sides” to the climate change debate. Through complex “platforms, algorithms, and contents”, social media takes on an active role to reinforce the beliefs and opinions that nourish denialism.

Censorship of books, curricular changes and the banning of topics such as critical race theory make up the daily life of many countries. The epicenter of this irrationalist onslaught is located in the far-right in the United States which then radiates to several countries. In Brazil, the Bolsonaro government spread the School Without Parties agenda that rewrote the curricular contents based on denialism while religious fundamentalists propagated the so-called morality agenda (such as gender ideology). The core of this narrative says that science and education are under the influence

[ticiasagricolas.com.br/noticias/meio-ambiente/231554-cientistas-liderados-por-lcmolion-confrontam-ambientalistas-que-defendem-o-aquecimento-climatico.html#.ZCXOIehKjIW](https://www.noticiasagricolas.com.br/noticias/meio-ambiente/231554-cientistas-liderados-por-lcmolion-confrontam-ambientalistas-que-defendem-o-aquecimento-climatico.html#.ZCXOIehKjIW)

of cultural Marxism and of values that are hostile to Western, Christian civilization. Climatism (a derogatory way of referring to environmental studies) would be an expression of this.

Educators who defend the environmental agenda are also under strong pressure. The far-right works to ban academic freedom, the academic authority of teachers, democratic public schools, libraries, universities and collective movements that defend *el buen vivir*, or the good way of living. Moreover, educators live under the stress of responding to the challenges of this historic moment. Due to the magnitude, urgency and hardships of the challenges faced with the aforementioned metabolic rupture that threatens the survival of humanity, profound and complex changes need to happen in education and currently no favorable correlation of forces exists to achieve this. In terms of social struggles, it will be necessary to organize and raise the consciousness of the working class in all its expressions and beyond national borders as advocated by **the Initiative for Democratic Education in the Americas (IDEA Network)**. This is not a dispute that can be resolved on the basis of the best arguments, even if these are crucial.

There are powerful and organized bourgeois factions that act to move this topic to the technical realm as if, with better technologies, everything could return to the new normal. It is true that new technologies can correct environmental problems, but that will not correct metabolic ruptures. Such beliefs, despite their proclaimed good intentions, obscure the causes of metabolic ruptures in order to delay structural changes to the production and circulation of capital. The debate on the Green New Deal, outlined by Naomi Klein (2020), allows us to highlight part of this problem.

Anti-systemic educational agendas

Only knowledge produced and circulated in educational and science and technology institutions will be able to make socio-environmental problems thinkable through new epistemological perspectives that enable other prisms for investigation, understanding and subjective

internalization of the meaning of these metabolic ruptures for the future of life on the planet. In place of the sterile utilitarian competencies defended by business entities that dispute the social function of public education, debates on curriculum will have to transcend the rigid divisions between the natural sciences and the human and social sciences, without, however, erasing their particularities. Mathematics, physics, chemistry, geophysics, climatology and biology and other disciplines need to be freed from the chains that bind them to the positivism and utilitarianism required by capital and that prohibit the connection of these sciences with the social life and problems of the peoples.

Even at the epistemological level, socio-environmental problems involve interculturality, the accumulated knowledge of indigenous peoples and peasants, and of other collective subjects, about ecosystems, biomes and, specifically, about crops, biodiversity and the expressions (and consequences) of metabolic rupture (socio-environmental crises and catastrophes, such as global warming). Consideration of interculturality requires dialogical methodologies, symbolic interactions and true listening about how such socio-environmental problems are perceived, known and transformed by subjects.

It is not enough to “demonstrate” that science has produced knowledge that confirms the extent of environmental catastrophes. There are millions of deniers who refuse to accept the contributions of science and instead trust the information provided by social networks or fundamentalist religious agents. Therefore, it is not enough to “deliver packages of knowledge” that, although recognized by the scientific field, are delivered in a dogmatic, unilateral way, ignoring the common sense of students and their families.

This critical perspective on positivism demonstrates that the serious ecological crisis cannot be faced only with behavioral changes by separate individuals regarding the use of energy, water resources, etc. The pedagogy based on individualism that underlies standardized assessments, rankings and a meritocracy devoid of



IMAGE: PIXABAY, TAKEN FROM THE NEWSPAPER "EL PAÍS".

merit, is unable to contribute to the transformation of schools and universities into pulsating and lively centers of knowledge. Socio-environmental challenges require collective action, based on values of active solidarity, cooperation and the formation of a political will capable of facing the contradictions created by capitalism.

In contrast to pedagogies based on the logic of austerity and the consequent managerialism that depoliticizes and technocratizes education, students must experience science so that cracks are opened in the denialist thinking which is engrained in various social groups. It is important to continue to fight for schools to be institutions in which theories, methods, forms of validation, the history of science errors in science

and practical activities are dialogically contextualized.

Education and the scientific field need to systematically problematize the production and circulation of commodities that, under capitalist imperatives – an alienating form dominated by exchange-value and not by use-value –, produce metabolic ruptures. There is a geoeconomy that allows us to hierarchize the main centers of destruction of the planet. IPCC³ studies highlight the human causes. The destruction of biomes (in the Brazilian case, especially the Amazon and Cerrado), the emission of gases, the geographical

[3] Climate change 2022: Impacts, adaptation and vulnerability. IPCC. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg2/>

inequality of the use of natural resources and energy, energy matrices, the contamination of soil, water and food through pesticides and brutal extractivism necessarily lead us to the sociometabolic forms of capital in today's capitalism. It is imperative that pedagogy work with perspectives committed to understanding and explaining the determinants of phenomena, aiming to ensure that new generations can combat the causes of socio-environmental crises and catastrophes.

Schools are already suffering the consequences of metabolic rupture and environmental and ecological crises. More than a billion students experienced the hardships of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 and 2021 (which is still ongoing, but with better protection from vaccines). Millions of students are affected by climate catastrophes, such as changes in isotherms (extreme cold, heat waves, storms, droughts and floods), arboviruses and hunger due to crop losses. It is impossible to dissociate them from sociometabolic ruptures and socio-environmental problems. The urgency and opportunities of such problems are real imperatives.

Faacing these immense problems and socio-environmental disasters reaches to the core of public education and involves a deep level of sharing knowledge that can provide the conditions to develop inventive, creative imaginations, which are open to the historical time and social protagonism of students. It collides with the rigid core of reactionary thought spread by the far-right. Political pedagogy is abhorred by the right for its critical perspective on possessive individualism and the belief that the family is the sole center of gravity of human sociability. Right-wing extremists argue that it is up to the private realm to define curriculum, values, readings, interpretations about the origin of life and evolution and the "correct" forms of affective, sexual, religious, patriarchal relationships, etc. The so-called moral agenda, one of the central aspects of the culture wars, is a strategy by the far-right with which to enter school spaces and the private life

of families, reaching hundreds of millions of people around the world. Once nestled in families, the path to denialist agendas is open.

The succession of events that create ecological catastrophes requires new theoretical references, epistemologies and collective effort of interdisciplinary research that is open to intercultural approaches. Public education, to be in tune with the challenges for humanity, has the challenge of changing its curricula and pedagogical practices so that the new generations can understand and explain the nature of socio-environmental crises. Considering the urgency for collective action in the face of the problems, political pedagogy is both a stimulus and a gesture of trust in the capacity of human beings to forge alternatives.

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